

Passages from Baudrillard on the notion that we have moved on from Capitalism

For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign

Thanks to consumption, the system not only succeeds in exploiting people by force, but in making them participate in its multiplied survival. This is a considerable advance. But this participation only takes on its whole fantastic scope at the level of signs. It is there that the entire strategy of “neo-capitalism” is articulated in its originality: in a semiurgy and an operational semiology, which are only the developed form of controlled participation.

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Such is the political ideology of design, which attains its global scope today in the discourse of environment. From Gropius to Universitas, there is a continuous succession of stages toward what could be termed a metadesign, a meta- political economy which is to neo-capitalism what the classic liberal economy was to capitalism.

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Echoing Galbraith’s “techno-structure.” Neo-capitalist, neo-industrialist, post-industrial many terms can designate this passage from an industrial political economy to a trans-political economy (or meta-political economy).

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Mirror of Production

Even the Situationists, without doubt the only ones to attempt to extract this new radicality of political economy in their "society of the spectacle," still refer to the "infrastructural" logic of the commodity. From this derives their fidelity to the proletariat, which is logical if, behind the organization of the spectacle, the exploitation of labor power is still determinant -- the spectacle being only an immense connotation of the commodity. But this is illogical if the concept of the spectacle is taken as that of the commodity, as Marx did in his time, in all its radicality as a generalized process of social abstraction in which "material" exploitation is only one particular phase. In this hypothesis, it is the form-spectacle that is determinant since one begins with the most developed structural phase. This step truly overturns perspectives regarding politics, revolution, the proletariat and social classes. But this is to accept or to allow at any rate that a revolution has occurred in the capitalist world without our Marxists having wanted to comprehend it. The objection that our society is still largely dominated by the logic of commodities is irrelevant. When Marx set out to analyze capital, capitalist industrial production was still largely a minority phenomenon. When he designated political economy as the determining sphere, religion was still largely dominant. The theoretical decision is never made at the quantitative level, but at the level of a structural critique.

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At bottom, the question is posed as follows:

-- Are we always within the capitalist mode of production? If the answer is yes, we readily accept classical Marxist analysis.

-- Are we within a later mode, so different in its structure, in its contradictions and in its mode of revolution, that one must distinguish it radically from capitalism (while maintaining that it is always a question of a mode of production which is determinant as such)?

-- Are we, quite simply, within a mode of production at all, and have we ever been in one?

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With monopolistic capitalism, the same mutation occurs in the sphere of the sign; the final reference of the products, their use value, completely disappears. Needs lose all their autonomy; they are coded. Consumption no longer has a value of enjoyment per se; it is placed under the constraint of an absolute finality which is that of production. Production, on the contrary, is no longer assigned any finality other than itself. This total reduction of the process to a single one of its terms, in which the others are only excuses (use value is the excuse for exchange value; the referent is the excuse for the code) designates more than an evolution of the capitalist mode: it is a mutation. Through the elevation of production to a total abstraction (production for its own sake), to the power of a code, which no longer even risks being called into question by an abolished referent, the system succeeds in neutralizing not only consumption, but production itself as a field of contradictions.

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Symbolic Exchange and Death (revised edition)

Capital no longer belongs to the order of political economy: it operates with political economy as its simulated model. The entire apparatus of the commodity law of value is absorbed and recycled in the larger apparatus of the structural law of value, thus becoming part of the third order of simulacra (see below).

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Now we have passed from the commodity law of value to the structural law of value, and this coincides with the obliteration of the social form known as production. Given this, are we still within a capitalist mode? It may be that we are in a hyper-capitalist mode, or in a very different order. Is the form of capital bound to the law of value in general, or to some specific form of the law of value (perhaps we are really already within a socialist mode? Perhaps this metamorphosis of capital under the sign of the structural law of value is merely its socialist outcome? Oh dear ...)? If the life and death of capital are staked on the *commodity* law of value, if the revolution is staked on the mode of production, then we are within neither capital nor revolution. If this latter consists in a liberation of the social and generic production of man, then there is no longer any prospect of a revolution since there is no more production. If, on the other hand, capital is a *mode of domination*, then we are always in its midst. This is because the structural law of value is the purest, most illegible form of social domination, like surplus-value. It no longer has any references within a dominant class or a relation of forces, it works without violence, entirely reabsorbed without any trace of bloodshed into the signs which surround us,

operative everywhere in the code in which capital finally holds its purest discourses, beyond the dialects of industry, trade and finance, beyond the dialects of class which it held in its 'productive' phase – a symbolic violence inscribed everywhere in signs, even in the signs of the revolution.

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From a capitalist productivist society to a neo-capitalist cybernetic order, aiming this time at absolute control: the biological theory of the code has taken up arms in the service of this mutation.

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In both cases, the passage to a functional finality, the rational assignation of an 'objective' content (use-value or signified-referent), seals the assignation of a structural form that is the form of political economy itself. In the 'neo-capitalist' (techno- and semiocratic) framework, this form is systematised at the expense of 'objective' reference: signifieds and use-values progressively disappear to the great advantage of the operation of the code and exchange-value.

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But we know what these hidden places signify: the factory no longer exists because labour is everywhere; the prison no longer exists because arrests and confinements pervade social space-time; the asylum no longer exists because psychological control and therapy have been generalised and become banal; the school no longer exists because every strand of social progress is shot through with discipline and pedagogical training; capital no longer exists (nor does its Marxist critique) because the law of value has collapsed into self-managed survival in all its forms, etc., etc. The cemetery no longer exists because modern cities have entirely taken over their function: they are ghost towns, cities of death. If the great operational metropolis is the final form of an entire culture, then, quite simply, ours is a culture of death.

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In its violent classical phase, which even today coincides with conservative thought, capital plays on the discourse of conscious psychology and responsibility, and therefore repression: this is the terrorist discourse of capitalism. In its more advanced phase, which coincides with progressive, even revolutionary thought, neo-capitalism plays on the discourse of psychoanalysis: unconscious, irresponsibility, tolerance and reform. Consciousness and responsibility are the normative discourse of capital. The unconscious is the liberal discourse of neo-capitalism.

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Simulacra and Simulation

More than a chain of work it is thus a question of a programmatic discipline whose constraints have been effaced behind a veneer of tolerance. Well beyond traditional institutions of capital, the hypermarket, or the Beaubourg "hypermarket of culture," is already the model of all future forms of controlled socialization: retotalization in a homogeneous space - time of all the dispersed functions of

the body and of social life (work, leisure, media culture), retranscription of all the contradictory currents in terms of integrated circuits. Space-time of a whole operational simulation of social life.

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The system puts an end one by one to all its axioms, to all its institutions, and realizes one by one all the objectives of the historical and revolutionary Left that sees itself constrained to revive the wheels of capital in order to lay siege to them one day: from private property to the small business, from the army to national grandeur, from puritan morality to petit bourgeois culture, justice at the university - everything that is disappearing, that the system itself, in its atrocity, certainly, but also in its irreversible impulse, has liquidated, must be conserved.

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In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities

Ultimately, things have never functioned socially, but symbolically, magically, irrationally, etc. Which implies the formula: capital is a *defiance* of society. That is to say that this perspective, this panoptic machine, this machine of truth, of rationality, of productivity which is capital, is without objective finality, without reason: it is above all a violence, and this violence is perpetrated by the social on the social, but basically it is not a social machine, it doesn't care a damn about capital or likewise about the social in their equally interdependent and antagonistic definition. This is to say, once more, that there is no contract, no contract is ever exchanged between distinct agencies according to the law - that is all sound and fury - there are only ever stakes, defiances, that is to say something which does not proceed via a "social relation. "

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A de-simulation which itself captures the style of a challenge (the reverse of capital's challenge of the social and society): a challenge to the belief that capital and power exist according to their own logic - *they have none*, they vanish as apparatuses as soon as the simulation of social space is undone.⁸ This is really what we are seeing today: the disintegration of the whole idea of the social, the consumption and involution of the social, the breakdown of the social simulacrum, a genuine defiance of the constructive and productive approach to the social which dominates us.

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4. It is no longer even a question of the production of the social, for then socialism, indeed capitalism itself would be equal to the task. In fact, everything changes with the precession of the production of demand before that of goods. Their logical relationship (between production and consumption) is broken, and we move into a totally different order. which is no longer that of either production, or consumption, but that of the simulation of both, thanks to the inversion of the process. At present, it is no longer a question of a "real" crisis of capital. a crisis Attali thinks can be treated by a little extra social or socialism, but of quite a different mechanism, the hyper- real. which no longer has anything to do with either capital or the social.

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11. This system of equivalences is not necessarily linked to the political economy of capital.

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Fatal Strategies

Publicity, abstract, abject circulation of Eurodollars, stock prices, immorality of fashion cycles, useless technologies of prestige, electoral parades, arms escalation, all this is not only the historical sign of the domination of capital, but the most decisive proof of a fact more important than capital itself: the proof that no social project worthy of the name has ever really existed, that in the end no group has ever really conceived itself as social, that is to say in solidarity with its own values and coherent in its collective project, in short, there has never been even the shadow nor the embryo of a responsible collective subject, nor even the possibility of an objective of this kind.

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Cool Memories One

This fabulous object, a testament to the immense useless capacity of man, should immediately be put away in a museum, in a crypt of neon, together with all the workers who are now slaves not of capital, but merely of the legend of work, and who have, in their own lifetimes, become part of the legend of the factories.

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The rich never give you anything (dixit A.). Wealth is unrelenting; it always screws you. Those who are rich in intelligence, power and beauty don't give much away either. They make you pay all the more for the fact that their capital is symbolic.

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The Transparency of Evil

The proletariat has not succeeded in negating itself as such - the century and a half since Marx has made that clear. The proletariat has failed to negate itself qua class and thereby abolish class society per se. Perhaps this is because the proletariat never was a class, as had been supposed - because only the bourgeoisie was a true Class, and therefore the only one capable of negating itself as such. For it has indeed negated itself, along with capital, and so generated a classless society, albeit one which has nothing to do with the classless society that was supposed to arise from a revolution and from a negation of the proletariat as such. As for the proletariat, it has simply disappeared - vanished along with the class struggle itself. There can be no doubt that had capitalism developed in accordance with its own contradictory logic, it would have been defeated by the proletariat. In an ideal sense, Marx's analysis is still irreproachable. But Marx simply did not foresee that it would be possible for capital, in the face of the imminent threat to its existence, to transpoliticize itself, as it were: to launch itself into an orbit beyond the relations of production and political contradictions, to make itself autonomous in a free-floating, ecstatic and haphazard form, and thus to totalize the world in its own image. Capital (if it may still be so called) has barred the way of political economy and the law of value; it is in this sense that it has successfully escaped its own end. Henceforward it can function independently of its own former aims, and absolutely without reference to any aims whatsoever. The inaugural event of this

mutation was undoubtedly the Great Crash of 1929; the stock market crisis of 1987 was merely an aftershock.

Revolutionary theory also enshrined the living utopian hope that the State would wither away, and that the political sphere would negate itself as such, in the apotheosis of a finally transparent social realm. None of this has come to pass. The political sphere has disappeared, sure enough - but so far from doing so by means of a self-transcendence into the strictly social realm, it has carried that realm into oblivion with it. We are now in the transpolitical sphere; in other words, we have reached the zero point of politics, a stage which also implies the reproduction of politics, its endless simulation. For everything that has not successfully transcended itself can only fall prey to revivals without end. So politics will never finish disappearing - nor will it allow anything else to emerge in its place. A kind of hysteresis of the political reigns.

Art has likewise failed to realize the utopian aesthetic of modern times, to transcend itself and become an ideal form of life. (In earlier times, of course, art had no need of self-transcendence, no need to become a totality, for such a totality already existed - in the shape of religion.) Instead of being subsumed in a transcendent ideality, art has been dissolved within a general aestheticization of everyday life, giving way to a pure circulation of images, a transaesthetics of banality. Indeed, art took this route even before capital, for if the decisive political event was the strategic crisis of 1929, whereby capital debouched into the era of mass transpolitics, the crucial moment for art was undoubtedly that of Dada and Duchamp, that moment when art, by renouncing its own aesthetic rules of the game, debouched into the transaesthetic era of the banality of the image.

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Along with Marx, we too dreamt of the end of Political Economy - of the abolition of classes and the advent of a transparent social realm in accordance with the ineluctable logic of Capital. And then we dreamt of the end of the economy in terms of a disavowal of its basic tenets - a disavowal that threw out the Marxist critique into the bargain: on this view, primacy was accorded neither to the economic nor to the political - the economy was simply ushered out as a mere epiphenomenon, vanquished by its simulacrum of itself, and by a superior logic.

Today we no longer even need to dream: Political Economy is coming to an end before our eyes, metamorphosing into a transeconomics of speculation which merely plays at obeying the old logic (the law of value, the laws of the market, production, surplus-value, all the classical laws of capital) and there fore no longer has anything economic or political about it. A game and nothing but a game, with floating and arbitrary rules: a game of catastrophe.

So Political Economy will indeed soon have come to an end - though not at all in the way we once envisaged: rather, through the exacerbation of its own logic to the point of self-parody.

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The strength of the Japanese lies in the kind of hospitality they accord to technology and to all forms of modernity (just as, in the past, they opened their doors to religion and writing). Their hospitality involves no psychological internalization or commitment on their part, however, and things are kept strictly at the level of codes. It is more a form of challenge than an offer of reconciliation or

recognition: their own impenetrability remains total. This is, literally, a sort of seduction whereby something - a sign, a technique or an object - is diverted from its own essence and made to function in another code; or - to put it another way - made to pass from the realm of laws (capital, value, economy, meaning) into the realm of rules (play, rituals, ceremonies, cycles, repetition) .

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Symbolic rituals can absorb anything, including the organless body of capitalism.

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The Illusion of the End

We have here an escalation in the psychological balance of terror. World capitalist oppression is now merely the vehicle and alibi for this other, much more ferocious, form of moral predation. One might almost say, contrary to the Marxist analysis, that material exploitation is only there to extract that spiritual raw material that is the misery of peoples, which serves as psychological nourishment for the rich countries and media nourishment for our daily lives.

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Baudrillard Live

SL The transpolitical would be a negative notion then? It's the same scene but emptied out from within.

In that sense, yes. That is part of the exterminating analysis. I'm not crazy about the term itself. It's almost too 'figurative'. It signifies that there could still be a beyond, and that we ought to go and take a look at what's going on there. I prefer the formulation in terms of that point Canetti describes. We don't know what happened after that. The traditional points of reference are no longer usable, but we don't know what we are in. To demand a degree of truth is always problematical. Fascism was already something like that. It was a kind of potentialization. That is why it remains relatively inexplicable in political terms, such as capitalism or class struggle.

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The question of the intellectuals, moreover, is a bit of a joke. Obviously, I am one of them as far as life-style is concerned. But I don't feel myself to be an intellectual in the sense that, if there are three of them together, I flee. Moreover, I am no longer an intellectual in the sense that I no longer pretend to that privileged position of a person who has the right to know and to write. I just write for myself. It is true that people take a certain pride in being in that marginal and exceptional situation, therefore in a situation that also confers a privilege. But like the capital of capitalism, there is no more symbolic intellectual capital to manage, there are no more stocks. Radicality can no longer exist in our heads, it has passed into things, and it is in things that one can, at best, try to decode it, decipher it, to force it to appear, but not in terms of a subject of knowledge or as a subject of writing. I no longer take a position as intellectual. My work now is to make things appear or disappear.

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AL *Would you say that the reifying logic of market societies—and of their most highly developed form, capitalism—must have stemmed originally from a metaphysical terror, which could lead us into an even worse trap?*

The paradox of capitalism in so far as it is no longer a capitalism subject to contradiction, dialectical and therefore capable of revolution is that it swallows up the real more quickly than it manufactures it; and that leads us into completely aleatoric processes. The antibodies work much more quickly than the bodies... I don't know if we can still call this system capitalism. Let us say it is rather an enormous piece of techno-realist machinery which exacerbates all the non-symbolic means of control over illusion, that is to say, which exacerbates its elimination. We must be frank and brutally honest: we live in extermination, in which physical exterminations are merely episodes. I treated the Gulf War in that way, as a process of the extermination of war, an operational stage set of a fact, war, which in former times, however, was above all a symbolic duel relationship. It was 'realized' by sophisticated technical means, and it doesn't take place, in the sense that there's no event.

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The Uncollected Baudrillard

The genuine relief that would assure (that has occasionally been assured) the communists and the Left is not the one that Sanguinetti announced, in order to denounce, in his *True Report*. It is much more gloomy and more subtle: *the communists will one day take power in order to hide the fact that it no longer exists*. It will therefore not consist of a subversion of capital, nor a revolution of capital on itself, but quite simply a political involution, a reabsorption of the political and of all political violence in a society devoted to the exclusive game of mass simulation.

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The Intelligence of Evil

From feudalism to capital and beyond, what we see is, above all, an immense advance in the freedom of exchange, in the free circulation of goods, flows, persons and capital.

The movement is irreversible, not in terms of human progress but in terms of the market, of the progressive advance of an inescapable globalization.

This is the last stage liberalism passes through in its un-remitting advance towards generalized exchange, a process of which capital, with its conflicts, contradictions, violent history - simply with its 'history' - is ultimately just the prehistory.

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Terrorism operates at a higher level of radicalism: it is not a subject of history; it is an elusive enemy. And if the class struggle generated historical events, terrorism generates another type of event. Global power (which is no longer quite the same as capital) finds itself here in direct confrontation with itself. It is now left to deal not with the spectre of communism, but with its own spectre.

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Utopia Deferred

WITH THE GENERALIZATION of political economy, it becomes more and more evident that its originary action is not where Marxist analysis grasped it, in the exploitation of labor as productive force, but rather in the imposition of a form, of a general code of rational abstraction, of which the capitalist rationalization of material production is only a particular case. The domestication of language in the code of signification, the domestication of all social and symbolic relations in the schema of representation are not only contemporaneous with political economy, they are its process itself. Today it betrays its form and radicalizes itself in these "superstructural" realms. The capitalist system, linked to profit and exploitation, is only the inaugural modality, the infantile phase of the system of political economy. The schema of value (exchange and use) and of general equivalence is no longer limited to "production": it invested the spheres of language, of sexuality, etc. The form has not changed. One can also speak of a political economy of the sign, a political economy of the body, without metaphor. But the center of gravity has been displaced. The epicenter of the contemporary system is no longer the process of material production.

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The properly capitalist phase of socialization forced by labor, of the intensive mobilization of productive forces has been overturned. Now we have a desublimation of productive forces-without the logic of the system betraying the world in the least, on the contrary, its logic of reproduction expanding in its way. Everything happens as if the industrial coercion, disciplinary concentration, the integration of larger and larger masses in the apparatus of production since the

19th century, the directed crystallization of every energy into material production, was only a provisional solution, enormous but provisional, an enterprise of rationalization and of social control, the breadth of which largely surpasses this phase. Surplus value, profit, exploitation-all of these "objective realities" of capital never do more than mask the immense social domestication, the immense directed sublimation, of which the process of production is only the tactical aspect. Today the system reproduces itself according to an inverse tactic: no longer a general mobilization but a technological rationalization, which has the effect of corrupting whole categories or a greater and greater fraction of the productive social time of all categories. Today, contradictions appear from this "demobilized sphere," repressively "desublimated" in regard to production, no longer from the sphere of productivist exploitation.

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How can we explain the bankruptcy of the myth of abundance? Why is it less effective than that of scarcity? Why is it a necessity for the capitalist system-which surpassed without too much trouble the stage of production so as to enter into that of reproduction-to reinvest in this moribund myth and why precisely this myth? Production for production, would unlimited development be a viable objective? A switch error (capitalism realizing that it has taken a wrong turn)? Or is something else at stake? A vast masquerade mounted by capitalism itself, which serves as a myth corresponding to a surpassed stage of its own development so as to better assure its future . . .

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THERE IS EFFECTIVELY still an illusion in thinking that the system of capital, to a certain threshold of expanded reproduction, passes irreversibly from a strategy of scarcity to a strategy of abundance. The present crisis proves that this strategy is reversible. The illusion came once again from a naïve faith in a reality of scarcity or in a reality of abundance, and therefore from the illusion of a real opposition between the two terms, one following the other as its opposite (as in its dialectical surpassing). In this way these two terms are quite simply alternatives and the strategic definition of neo-capitalism, is not to pass from the phase of abundance (of consumption, of repressive desublimation, of sexual liberation, etc.) but to the phase of the systematic alternation between the two: scarcity and abundance-because the two terms no longer have any reference, nor therefore any antagonistic reality, and therefore the system can jump indifferently from one to the other. This represents the completed stage of reproduction. Thus, in the political sphere, this stage is reached when, all antagonism between the Left and the Right having been neutralized, the exercise of power can play alternatives with one and then with the other.

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We will live in this world, which for us has all the disquieting strangeness of the desert and of simulacra, with all the veracity of living phantoms, of errant and simulating animals that capital, that the death of capital has made of us-because the desert of towns is equal to the desert of sands the jungle of signs is equal to that of forests-the dizziness of simulacra is equal to that of nature-only the vertiginous seduction of a dying system remains, in which labor buries labor, value buries value-leaving a virgin space, fearful, without clearings, continuous as Bataille wanted it, where only the wind lifts the sand, where only the wind watches over the sand.

What is political about this? Very little.

But we also have to struggle against the profound fascination exerted on us by the death throes of capital, against capital's staging of its own death, where we are the ones in real agony. To let capital initiate its own death is to grant it all the privileges of the revolution. Surrounded by the simulacra of value and by the phantom of

capital and of power, we are much more disarmed and impotent than surrounded by the law of value and of commodities, since the system has revealed itself to be capable of integrating its own death, and since we are relieved of responsibility for this death, and therefore of the wager of our own life. The supreme ruse of the system, that of the simulacra of its death, through which it keeps us alive, having liquidated through absorption every possible negativity, only a superior ruse can forestall it. Defiance or imaginary science, only a pataphysics of simulacra can deliver us from the system's strategy of simulation and from the impasse of death wherein it encloses us.

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But if one admits that the fundamental question today is no longer that of capital, but that of the social, and that the only tactic for the regeneration of the social, of the accelerated production of the social, is that of the discourse of crisis, then one must think that the Left, because it is born of and nourished by critical thought, it will impose itself on power as the most credible spokesperson, the most coherent effigy, the most faithful mirror of the crisis. Power will be assigned to it not to resolve the real crisis

(there isn't one) but to manage the discourse of the crisis, the critical phase of capital that will not end, since it is that of the social.

If something of Marx must be retained, it will be this; capital produces the social, the social is its essential product, it is its "historical function." And the grand phases of the social, the convulsions and revolutions, coincide with the ascendant phase of capital. When the objective determinations of capital wane, the social surpasses it in a dialectical stride, it collapses too, in the same way that a bloodless imaginary corresponds to a moribund reality. What we are witnessing today; the Left dying the same death as power.

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The Agony of Power

In the face of this hegemony, the work of the negative, the work of critical thought, of the relationship of forces against oppression, or of radical subjectivity against alienation, all this has (virtually) become obsolete. It has become obvious that, thanks to the twists and turns of cynical reason, or the ruses of history, this new hegemonic configuration (which is no longer the hegemony of capital) has absorbed the negative, negativity as a way of regaining the initiative. Caught in a vast Stockholm Syndrome, the alienated, the oppressed, and the colonized are siding with the system that holds them hostage. They are now "annexed," in the literal sense, prisoners of the "nexus," of the network, connected for better or worse.

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Three simultaneous dimensions form the passage from domination to hegemony. It is a perilous triple jump, a three-part sacrifice:

- 1) Capital surpasses itself and turns against itself in the sacrifice of value (the economic illusion).
- 2) Power turns against itself in the sacrifice of representation (the democratic illusion).
- 3) The entire system turns against itself in the sacrifice of reality (the metaphysical illusion).

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In any event, the question of "capital" must be reconfigured. Does something like capital still exist, and, if there is a crisis, what is the essence of this crisis? We must try to pass "through the looking glass," beyond the mirror of production.

Does exploitation still exist? Can we still talk about alienation? Have we become the hostages (not the slaves, but the hostages) of a global market under the definitive sign of globalization? But can we still talk of a "market"? And hasn't capitalism reached the point of destroying the conditions of its own existence?

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This is no longer true for the financial flows and international speculation that far surpass the law of the market. Can we still speak of capital? Do we keep the term and the concept and therefore acknowledge the exponential strategy that pushes capital beyond its own limits, into a whirlwind of exchanges where capital loses its very essence which is the essence of the market-and self-destructs in an unbridled

circulation that li the very concept of exchange to an end? Or do we consider that it is no longer capital at all but something radically different, an exchange that is not only general but total-completely freed from due and markets-an exchange that, having lost its rational principle, the principle of value, becomes integral just as reality, having lost its reality principle, becomes integral reality, from which there is no salvation?

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In this light, capital in its historical form appears to be a lesser evil. In relation to a virtual universe, reality appears to be a lesser evil. In view of hegemony, domination itself appears to be a lesser evil. Take the example of the Web, the Internet, networks, blogs, etc. It is all free, "liberally" deployed without economic constraints, beyond markets, in a frenzy of total communication. This is a virtual catastrophe, the catastrophe of total exchange that is not even protected by money or the market. We find ourselves wanting it all to be subject to the law of value, taken in hand by capitalist power, to slow its exponential development, to escape the ecstasy of (free, secular and obligatory) communication- because it is leading to the dictatorship of forced exchange but no one will escape.

The next stage, which can be seen in these mysteriously free networks, is much worse than anything that was stigmatized as the mercantilization of exchange, where everything is assigned a price and a market. This influence (which is not strictly speaking the influence of a person, a "capitalist" power or any political power) is the ascendancy of total, integral free exchange, universal wiring, universal connection. Capital, mar kets, surplus value, merchandise and prices seem like a lesser evil or protection against something worse. This is the virtual dimension of hegemony- it is different from the domination of capital and different from the dimension of power in its strictly political definition.

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And yet by the same token all critical negativity, all the work of the negative is abolished, devoured by signs and simulacra. In the context of hegemony, the historical work of critical thought, the relationship of forces against oppression, radical subjectivity against alienation are all (virtually) in the past. Simply because this new hegemonic configuration (which is no longer the configuration of capitalism at all) has itself absorbed the negative and used it for a leap forward through the meanders of cynical reasoning or the tricks of history.

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We can even forget about capital and capitalism. Didn't they reach the point where they would destroy their own conditions of existence? Can we still speak of a "market" or even of a classical economy? In its historical definition, capitalism presided over the multiplication of exchanges under the auspices of value. The market obeys the law of value and equivalency. And the crises of capital can always be resolved by regulating value.

This is no longer true for the financial flows and international speculation that far surpass the laws of the market. Can we still speak of capital when faced with an exponential strategy that pushes capital beyond its limits in a whirlwind of exchanges where it loses its very essence and is dispersed in an unbridled circulation that brings the very concept of exchange to an end?

Having lost its rational principle, the principle of value, exchange becomes total just as reality, having lost its reality principle, becomes total reality. It may be the fatal destination of capital to go to the end of exchange-toward a total consumption of reality. In any case, we are bound for this generalized exchange, this frenetic communication and information that is the sign of hegemony.

The dimension of hegemony is different from that of capital and different from the dimension of power in its strictly political definition. It is no longer a question of political power tied to a history and a form of representation. Representation itself has lost its principle and the democratic illusion is complete. Not through the violation of rights but through the simulation of values and the derealization of all reality. The masquerade again, everyone caught in the signs of power and communing in the rigged unfolding of the political stage.

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